

DIALOGUES WITH DESIGNERS ©

A simple format to understand complex problems regarding management in design studios.

CHAPTER 2

Where Pablo and Soledad describe the problem with the value as perceived by the client and start developing a different attitude to face the uncertainty that represents the management of their Studio.

Changing the question to understand the problem behind the client's request¹

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Note: this is a fictitious conversation since I never record meetings with clients. However, they represent doubts present on a daily basis in the professional practice of designers that manage their own Design Studio, as well as those who work independently.

Many clients hire the services of a designer only to tell them “how the task should be done”. This means the client knows the solutions to his problem, placing the designer in a position of translator of his solution to the graphic language, or as a “design operator”.

It is possible the client understands the problem... but it is possible that he doesn't. And there is where the designer adds value, if he really thinks he can, and has the skills to do so.

One of those skills is the comprehension of the client's problem. Every request carries a problem, and that problem is not explicitly what the request is placed for. That is the “**solution proposed by the client**”.

When the designer receives a request from a client and responds to it explicitly, without evaluating what the task really is and what real problem is behind such request, he places himself as a design operator. Even though that is exactly what he is trying to avoid.

To understand the problem behind a request, we can change the question that the client asks, that way we can present an answer both technical and economical according to the professionalism we wish to project.

Pablo and Soledad are graphic designers and have decided to form a partnership, after a few years of working independently, to start a design studio.

Soledad is twenty four years old, graduated from a private university. She has worked in several studios since she finished her career (three years ago). After two years of working for other employers, she explored the possibility of working for herself, with her own clients.

Pablo, twenty seven years old, is a graphic designer graduated from a public university. Since very early in his career he has worked independently (never in a dependant relationship), and this is the first time he tries to pursue his activities with another professional.

¹ Published in Grafitat Magazine, February 2010. (<http://www.grafitat.com/>).

Pablo and Soledad know each other since they were kids. Pablo's brother, Manuel, was a school classmate of Soledad. Since teenagers they have shared their mutual interest for design, and Pablo was determinant in Soledad's choice to study Graphic Design (although he did not share her parent's decision to send her to a private university).

At some point they studied the possibility of working together and apparently that moment has arrived. Nevertheless, it is possible that good intention is not sufficient to achieve the success they wish to obtain, not just as independent (freelance) designers, but as a Studio that can carry their professional development dreams.

Soledad: - The other day, as soon as we parted from our meeting, I kept thinking about something you said about problems...

Fernando: - Let's see...

Soledad: - You said something like "problems are not real nor objective..." Could that be?

Fernando: - I said there is no such thing as a "real or objective" problem, since what you consider a problem, is not considered as such by someone else.

Pablo: - ... she was talking about that all week; had me a little worn out with: "this is a problem and this is not, according to what Fernando said" (laughter).

Soledad: - Because I need to understand this properly before making any decisions that can commit us in ways we don't fully understand.

Fernando: - Many times we react to situations that are not really a problem, just to gain frustration with the impossibility of changing things. This happens in every aspect of life. But going back to the Studio and identifying problems, what I said the other day was referred to a phrase by Fred Kofman:

"problems are interpreted by an observer that thinks circumstances are not appropriate to satisfy his needs. Calling something a problem is revealing the dissatisfaction one has with the situation"

Soledad: - Who said that?

Fernando: - Fred Kofman. The author of a very interesting book called "Metamanagement"².

Pablo: - I'll never read that...(laughter).

Fernando: - You don't have to... don't worry, I won't give you any homework. I can tell you what it says, and - while we're at it - recommend you to read this and other books and articles. Another important thing he mentions is:

"a problem is always a judgment, made by a person, about the existence of a gap between what he wants and what he is experiencing. That is why problems are never external or independent from the person to whom they represent a problem to"

Soledad: - Is that why what I consider a problem may not be so for someone else?

Fernando: - Exactly. Even more, what may be a problem for you might not be a problem for another graphic designer working under similar conditions as you are.

² Kofman, F. (2001). Metamanagement. The new con-cience on businness. Volume I. Principles. Buenos Aires, Ediciones Granica S. A.

Soledad: - Yes, I can see that. The day after our last meeting I was speaking with a former classmate from school. She called in to consult the price on a service she was requested and we ended up talking about the value and price of our service.

Fernando: - And?

Soledad: - And... we ended up talking about the same thing we were discussing with you: we need an association that stands up for us to face the poor valuation of our work.

Fernando: - And then?

Soledad: - Talking to her I realized we were talking about something that has no solution from where we stand. How can I explain this... I got the feeling that our conversation was a waste of time. The idea is to find a way to present a proposal to a client in a way that he values the proposal and accepts the price we are presenting him.

Fernando: - Exactly.

If we don't have any degree of authority, power or influence to intervene in something we consider a problem, then it is not a problem but an unpleasant circumstance of reality.

Soledad: - Parting from the definition of problem, the gap would be: the expected behavior is "the client accepts the proposal and the price charged for it"; the real conduct is: "the client does not accept the proposal or tries to bargain the price". I can think the problem, or gap in this case, is related to the value as it is perceived by the client.

Fernando: - When the client tries to bargain the price, you interpret it as a lack of value for the task.

Pablo: - Yes, totally.

Fernando: - Then, having defined the gap from this situation, can we define what the problem really is?

Pablo: - I think the problem has to do with the value of the task from the client's perspective, as we discussed last week.

Fernando: - That's one way to look at it.

Pablo: - The problem is "the price is higher than the value perceived by the client".

Fernando: - So?

Pablo: - So we have to work in order to have no problem in that dimension of the proposal.

Fernando: - Meaning, closing the gap: the client values the proposal and accepts the price for it.

Soledad: - Yes... and how do we do that?

Fernando: - Working on the perception of value of the proposal, presenting it as a solution to a problem - for example, a communication problem - from the client's perspective.

Soledad: - That means that if a client asks us for an estimate for a logo...

Fernando: - You shouldn't send them an estimate for the logo. First you should understand what problem lays beneath the logo request.

Soledad: - I don't understand...

Fernando: - Look, this is basic: generally we try - and I include myself here - to answer questions in the way they are presented to us. Meaning, we rarely - excluding exceptions - try to modify the question we have been asked to find the problem underlying the request.

Soledad: - You're making me dizzy... can we go straight to the logo problem?

Fernando: - I'm talking about the way of posting the question limits the answer, and if we are not conscious of the fact that if we change the question we can find the problem, we will always be answering requests by clients instead of responding to the clients problems.

Soledad: - I didn't understand anything.

Pablo: - I did... it's about changing the question?

Fernando: - Yes. The client brings us what may be a problem, that can be - in this case - that he needs a new logo for his company, or to make new business cards.

Soledad: - And what is the problem if we honor that request?

Pablo: - What Fernando means is we are not listening to the client's problem.

Soledad: - The problem is the logo.

Pablo: - Can you focus a little on the conversation? We are talking about changing the client's question to respond to his problem. The problem is not the logo!

Many clients request the services of a designer only to tell them "how the job must be done". This means the client knows the solution to his problem, putting the designer in a position of translator of his solution to the graphic language, or as a "design operator".

Soledad: - You don't need to raise your voice...

Fernando: - Look... to be a little weary again and quote a book...

Soledad: - Another one? How many more..? Please...

Fernando: - Once again, you don't need to read it, just pay attention to what I'm saying and try to understand it from your position, directing a design studio.

Soledad: - Well, let's see, what are you going to talk about know?

Fernando: - Guy Kawasaki...he proposes...

Pablo: - Yes, I know him.

Soledad: - Great, good for you... that makes two!

Fernando: - In "Rules for revolutionaries"³ there is a passage that says exactly what I have told you before:

"The way of posting the question limits the answer. [...] We hardly spontaneously modify the conceptualization of a problem presented in a clear, complete way. [This is defined] as postulator effect because people try to resolve the problem as it is presented to them."

Soledad: - And what is there for us to learn there?

Fernando: - What you have to learn is that changing the question we change the answer.

Soledad: - Yes, obviously...

Fernando: - Well, then now you'll be able to tell me how does the question change in a client that requests a logo.

Soledad: - I don't know. That's what you're here for...

Fernando: - If I change the question, then I'll be evaluating the possibilities of problems to solve from my point of view, and here the only point of view that matters is yours as solution providers from visual communication.

Soledad: - We sell design... What is that about solutions of visual communication?

Fernando: - Oh, I forgot that - as design students - the only thing you are qualified to sell is just that: design.

Graphic designers do not sell design because clients do not buy design. When a client proposes a request to us, we can interpret he is looking for a solution of a communication problem. That solution is not design, it is a piece of communication (design is the "technology" to achieve the solution in a product).

Pablo: - Soledad, you are a little... distracted today, to use a less aggressive term...

Fernando: - Going back into our subject... changing the questions enables the comprehension of the problem, from the client's point of view. The problem, as we have discussed, is a gap between an expected conduct and a real one. Then, let's try to discover what is the client's problem to propose the best way of crossing the river...

Soledad: - And now what are you talking about?

Fernando: - I'm quoting Shakespear... in a note I read somewhere, he says "*many times what I am requested is a boat, but what they need is to cross a river*"³. You've probably read it...

Soledad: - No.

Pablo: - Yes, of course...

Fernando: - That's what it's about, finding what the client needs, despite his request.

Pablo: - I understand...

Soledad: - ¿And how do we do that?

Fernando: - Talking to the client. You'll know what kind of questions you need to make. Finally, you could present him a proposal that indicates: what you understood about his request, what you are going to do, how you're going to do it, when you are going to deliver advances of the task for his approval, when the final task will be finished, what the price for it is and how he is going to pay for it. Meaning, a technical and economic proposal. That's all.

A service proposal is much more than a simple line that shows the task price. That proposal must clearly define that the proposed solution is the answer to a problem we have understood (or at least, that we have tried understanding). The service proposal is the professional debate that separates the professional designer from the one who isn't. The economic proposal is the price that translates the service in terms of money.

³ Hervas, X. (2007). Interview with Ronald Shakespear. Recovered on october 23rd, from <http://www.disenoiberoamericano.com/node/86>

Soledad: - Only that? All that is going to take a lot of time from us. That implies meeting the client, having a conversation with him, making the proposal... those are too many useless work hours if we don't get the job.

Fernando: - Oh, you need the certainty of nailing every client you have received...

Soledad: - Obviously, yes.

Fernando: - And that is what you've been trying to do all this time, isn't it? Even though this means lowering your income expectations for the constant bargain from clients... Because when fortunately you get a work proposal you can't let it go, otherwise you would be letting it escape our net... because we don't go seeking for clients... Am I right?

Soledad: - ...

Fernando: - All this work is oriented in developing in you some management skills, among which is the administration of uncertainty. Handling that uncertainty means handling some ideas that you might not tolerate today.

Soledad: - Like what?

Fernando: - Like the idea of turning down certain clients under certain conditions.

Soledad: - But doing all that extra work, and I apologize because I did not mean that the meetings and such are useless work, do you think we are going to get the clients we need?

Fernando: - It is not a certain thing, but highly possible. At least in comparison with other studios in the conditions that you are today. I mean, in comparison to your current competition. You consider that "extra" work only because you have never done it. That extra work is part of the normal activities of any studio, venture, commerce... however you want to call it.

Pablo: - I was never told I would have to do all that to get a client.

Fernando: - That's a shame. You would have spared yourself a big amount of irritation and anger.

Soledad: ...that's true.

Fernando: - Well, to sum things up, you have to decide if you are going to keep regretting your situation or start thinking about your profession from a different place, very different from the illusion you have of it.

Soledad: - Yes, well... in a way that is what we are here for.

Fernando: - I think you realize what you need to start doing; now you need to start accepting that what you need to do, perhaps, is a little more uncomfortable in this first stage, since you have to learn different things and take care of aspects of your profession that you used to consider "unpleasant". Am I right?

Pablo: - Yes!

Fernando: Good, I'm glad that the mental models are rising. Can we carry on, then?

Pablo: - Of course, you're not getting rid of us that easily (laughter).

Soledad: - I want to go...

Fernando: - Ok. Then start listening to the clients requests with a different attitude. Try to discover what they want behind the logo request. The logo is their proposal, the answer to a problem unknown to us.

Pablo: - But before we go... can we resume what we talked about?

Fernando: - Of course. Understanding the problem the client proposes, parting from the request he gives us, implies - in many cases - not answering specifically to his request. Having an interview with the client that solicits a task from us to understand what is behind his petition, gives us the skills to present him with an economic and technical proposal that can ponder the two aspects that matter: the task itself and the reward expected for it (income expectations).

Soledad: - Are we going to dicuss the way to get new clients at any moment?

Fernando: - Of course we are, but we need to work with that restlessness which we are presenting this value of our task with.

Soledad: - Changing the question? Can't we start by answering the question as I'm telling you, that simple?

Fernando: - How did you do with your colleagues recommendations on how to get clients?

Soledad: - Don't tell me anything...

Pablo: - (laughter).

Fernando: - Do I need to say anything else? I belive not. See you next time.